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Title	An overview of developments in senior cycle education in Ireland 1965 - 1995
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	1996;1996
Original Citation	Hyland. Á. (1996) 'An overview of developments in senior cycle education in Ireland 1965 - 1995', Issues in Education - ASTI Education Journal.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-11-01 22:10:37
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18047

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"An Overview of Developments in Senior Cycle Education in Ireland 1965 – 1995"

published in

Pádraig Hogan (ed.) *Issues in Education* (ASTI Education Journal) 1996.

Abstract:

This paper summarises developments in senior cycle education in Ireland between 1965 when the *Investment in Education* report was published, to 1995. It highlights the six-fold growth in participation in senior cycle during that period and discusses the implications of that growth for the Leaving Certificate curriculum. It raises questions about the challenges which are likely to arise for the proposed new Leaving Certificate Applied for schools and teachers.

AN OVERVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS IN SENIOR CYCLE EDUCATION 1965-1995

(Paper submitted for ASTI publication on Senior Cycle, January, 1996)

In 1964 when the Investment in Education team analysed data relating to participation in post-primary education, there was a total of just over 25,000 pupils attending senior cycle post-primary education.[1] Thirty years later that figure has soared to over 157,000 - a six-fold increase.[2] In 1964 24,000 pupils were enrolled on the Leaving Certificate course and about 1,000 pupils were enrolled in vocational/technical programmes. Today 134,000 are following senior cycle general courses and almost 24,000 are enrolled on vocational/technical courses, mostly Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in the vocational sector. In other words, there are as many students enrolled on vocational/technical courses at senior cycle today as there were enrolled in total senior cycle thirty years ago.

The implications of this are enormous and one might argue that in spite of all the discussion during the past twenty years about this phenomenon, the support services put in place to address the development remain inadequate. While the growth in numbers is to some extent a result of increased population in the relevant age group (it is estimated that there are approximately 10,000 more young people in each age group today than there were thirty years ago), the increase in enrolment at senior cycle is largely a result of significantly increased participation rates. Whereas in 1964 only 44% of all pupils completed junior cycle second-level education and less than thirty years later it was estimated that about 75% completed senior cycle. The Government has set a target of 90% completion rate for senior cycle post-primary education by the year 2000.[3]

Much of the discussion relating to senior cycle education during the past decade has concentrated on the unsuitability of the traditional Leaving Certificate Programme for a significant proportion of the school-going population. The OECD *Review of National Education Policy* (1991) stated that the weight of the classical humanist tradition is enormous in Irish second-level education and it called for "a much more powerful parallel system of technical/vocational schools or a restructured general secondary education curriculum"[4]. Other reports which have called for a review of curriculum and examination at senior cycle include the recently published NCCA's *Review of Leaving Certificate Examination Results 1994s*[5] and the *Report of the Industrial Policy Review Group* (1992).[6] Within the education system, both pupils and teachers have in recent years indicated their conviction that the current Leaving Certificate Programme "is irrelevant for students of below average ability".[7] The survey carried out by the Hannon and Shortall for the Economic and Social Research Institute in 1991 confirmed that the most dissatisfied school leavers, were those who followed a general pass level Leaving Certificate academic programme.[8]

Before moving to address the alternative ways in which the needs of such pupils might be addressed, it is useful to analyse developments within the senior cycle over the past thirty years and in particular to see to what extent the subject choice of students following the Leaving Certificate Programme might have changed. Thirty years ago the *Investment in Education Report* was critical of the strong emphasis on the classical humanist subjects. It pointed out that whereas virtually all boys studied Latin and/or Greek at senior cycle level, very few of them studied a modern language. It also pointed out that very few girls studied Science subjects at Leaving Certificate particularly the Physical Sciences.[9] The situation has changed somewhat in the intervening thirty years but not as much as one might have expected as the following table shows.

Table 1: **Percentage of Second-Level Students Studying Selected Subjects at Senior Cycle - Leaving Certificate Programme (by Gender), 1964 and 1994[10]**

	Boys		Girls	
Subject	1964	1994	1964	1994
Irish	99.3	95.9	99.4	97.2
English	99.7	99.0	100.0	99.1
Greek	8.6	0.03	0.0	0.0
Latin	88.3	0.5	38.5	0.2
Classical Studies	N.A.	1.3	N.A.	0.7
French	21.0	52.5	64.4	69.6
German	1.9	17.4	2.7	22.0
History	64.3	30.4	73.1	26.0
Geography	80.9	45.1	89.6	36.8
Music[4]	0.6	0.7	1.7	3.2
Art[3]	1.8	14.6	18.2	21.4
Drawing/Technical Drawing	29.0	30.0	17.5	1.4
Maths	99.3	99.1	82.3	98.8
Commerce	22.0	N.A.	13.9	N.A.
Business Organisation[2]	N.A.	34.8	N.A.	39.4
Chemistry	31.7	15.4	4.8	13.2
Applied Mathematics	10.9	3.4	0.0	0.4
Physics	28.8	29.4	2.0	9.4
Physics and Chemistry	7.2	4.1	4.7	1.5
General Science	5.2	N.A.	4.7	N.A.
Engineering	N.A.	19.9	N.A.	0.8
Construction Studies	N.A.	25.1	N.A.	1.1
Botany	2.2	N.A.	8.6	N.A.
Physiology and Hygiene	1.0	N.A.	41.8	N.A.
Biology	N.A.	36.0	N.A.	64.9
Domestic Science	-	N.A.	60.3	N.A.
Home Economics[5]	N.A.	9.9	N.A.	56.7

Notes on Table 1:

1 The Leaving Certificate Programme was offered only in secondary schools in 1964.

2 As well as Business Organisation, Accounting and Economics are also offered in senior cycle.

3 The figures for Art in 1994 include both the Design and the Craftwork Option.

4 Music includes both Syllabus A and Syllabus B.

5 Home Economics includes both Social and Scientific and General.

In 1964 there were twenty-six subjects on the Leaving Certificate Programme. Thirty years later there are thirty-six subjects. However, this apparent growth in subject availability is largely explained by the development of options within some subject areas. For example, both Music and Art now have two options each (Music A or B and Art Craft or Design option). Similarly, Home Economics has an option of General and Social and Scientific; and instead of one single subject called Commerce in 1964 there are now four related subjects in this area - Accounting, Business Organisation, Economics and Economic History. Latin remains a subject of the senior cycle programme but it is joined by Classical Studies. Engineering and Construction Studies are new additions to the programme. Some of the subjects of 1964 no longer exist - these include Manual Training, General Science, Physiology and Hygiene and Botany. The now popular Biology has to a large extent superseded some of those subjects.

As can be seen from Table 1 the biggest changes in subject take-up have occurred in the Classical Subjects particularly Latin; whereas in 1964 88% of all boys studied Latin in senior cycle, today the corresponding figure is 0.5%. In addition, 1.5% of boys study Classical Studies. Commercial and business subjects have become more popular during the period. Whereas in 1964 only 22% of boys studied Commerce at senior cycle level, thirty years later 35% of boys studied Business Organisation and a significant number study Accounting and Economics. There has been little change in the area of the Physical Sciences. As regards Physics, the proportion taking the subject has remained virtually static at about 30% over the thirty year period. The proportion studying Applied Mathematics has fallen from 11% to 3.4%. On the arts side, there has been little or no change in Music with less than 1% of boys taking this subject at senior cycle. However, there has been a heartening increase in the proportion taking Art - from less than 2% in 1964 to over 14% in 1994.

An analysis of the situation in relation to girls shows a somewhat changed but not enormously changed situation. In areas which were almost entirely shunned by girls in 1964 there has been some small improvement. For example, whereas no girls took Applied Mathematics in 1964, today 280 girls take this subject (0.4%). As regards Physics the proportion of girls has increased from 2% in 1964 to over 9% - almost 6,000 girls - in 1994. There has been a small decrease in the proportion of girls taking Domestic Science/Home Economics, from 60% to 56.7% and an increase in the proportion taking Business/Commercial subjects - from 14% to 35%. The biggest change has occurred in the areas of History and Geography. Whereas 90% of girls studied Geography at senior cycle level in 1964, that proportion has fallen to 37% in 1994. In the case of History, the proportion has fallen from 73% to 26%.

However, one's overall impression in comparing the two sets of figures is not so much the extent to which the proportionate take-up of subjects has changed but the extent to which it has remained the same.

In the first decade after the introduction of free second-level education, very few changes were made in senior cycle programmes to address the needs of that cohort of students who had not previously remained on in full-time education at senior cycle level. By the mid 70s it was becoming clear that many such pupils experienced considerable difficulty in grappling with the Leaving Certificate Programme and a number of alternative programmes emerged, particularly in the vocational sector for such pupils. The decision of the European Community in 1976 to introduce educational initiatives to meet the needs of those young people least able to compete on the job market provided an opportunity to obtain further financial support for alternative programmes. In 1977, pre-employment courses were formally introduced by the Department of Education. These were confined initially to vocational, comprehensive and community schools

and were aimed at students who would otherwise have left school early. The demand for these new programmes was considerable and in the first year alone almost 2,000 pupils were enrolled on these courses. During the seven years from 1977 to 1984 important changes took place in the social and educational contexts of the programme and these changes shaped the introduction of the Vocational Preparation and Training Programme in 1984.[11]

There was a great deal of awareness in the early 1980s of the inappropriateness and inadequacy of the Leaving Certificate programme for many of our young people. The Government's *Programme for Action in Education 1984-1987* stated that:

> "there is world-wide awareness that the needs of those in the 15-18 age group not proceeding to higher education must be addressed in new and more imaginative ways. The uncertain employment market makes this problem a particularly urgent one at this time. The education and training system must respond accordingly to provide for those for whom the traditional Leaving Certificate is not seen as satisfactory.[12]

A further and important development in the 1980s was a recognition that specific job training should not be embarked upon at too early an age. In May, 1984 a document issued by the Department of Education containing the rationale, aims and structure of a Vocational Preparation and Training Programme included the following statement:

> "A number of recent studies, both in this country and elsewhere, have shown that employers value general competencies of literacy, numeracy and manipulative skills as much as they do skills related to specific types of jobs. --- generaliseable skills together with positive attitudes towards learning, adaptability and innovation will be the characteristics most sought after by employers and vocational preparation programmes should reflect these real marketable skill expectations in their design and implementation."[13]

Also in 1984 the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board was set up by the Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey. Among its terms of reference was the following:

> "The Board will initiate a review of the Leaving Certificate as a measure of general education. It will consider how the Leaving Certificate could be broadened in scope and in the range of skills and qualities measured, or whether it should be replaced by an alternative assessment system."

The Board was also asked to "formulate proposals for alternative senior cycle programmes, including programmes geared to preparation for work and those incorporating work experience and/or work simulation".[14]

From the very start the debate on senior cycle education at Board level was a complex and often contentious one. The Board appeared to find it difficult to grasp the issues relating to senior cycle education and its first consultative document - *Issues and Structures in Education* - is more vague in relation to senior cycle provision than other areas.[15] The framework for curriculum and assessment published by the Board in 1986 - *In Our Schools* - failed to come up with any clear recommendation about senior cycle. Its proposals simply agreed that "the Leaving Certificate programme should be adapted to cater for the increasingly diverse needs of students" and that "senior cycle provision should be distinguished by diversity of provision and approach to meet the differing needs of students".[16] In this regard the terms of reference of the Interim Board were stronger on specifics than was the Report *In Our Schools*.

It was not surprising then that a further consultative document on senior cycle - *Senior Cycle - Development and Direction* - was issued by the Curriculum and Examinations Board in November, 1986, some months before its disbandment.[17] This document proposed that an integrated approach to development at senior cycle should be undertaken but significantly it recommended that "a common certificate should be awarded to all senior cycle students, specifying particular programmes followed and courses taken". It recommended that the Leaving Certificate should remain as the programme catering for the majority of students at senior cycle

and that this should be the basis for further development. It also recommended the introduction of units of study and short courses and that a new level of certification for short courses should be introduced at Leaving Certificate level. Such certification should include a system of linked equivalency between various levels.[18]

The proposal made in the Curriculum and Examinations Board consultative document - *Senior Cycle* - in November, 1986 attracted a great deal of support within educational circles. The notion that senior cycle education should be seen as "a seamless robe" and that there should be easy movement between various types of courses was supported by many teachers and educationists. A further consultative document was issued by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in relation to senior cycle policy in 1990[19] and a subsequent position paper was presented to the then Minister in 1991.[20]

The proposals of the NCCA were incorporated in the Green Paper *Education for A Changing World* issued in June, 1992.[21] The Green Paper emphasised that given the very wide spread of ability levels and aptitudes of students who were following the senior cycle it was increasingly necessary to ensure that the provision at that level was appropriate and beneficial to all students. The Green Paper adverted to the fact that more than 15% of pupils failed to obtain five Grade Ds in the Leaving Certificate. It also referred to the findings of the survey carried out by Principals of voluntary secondary schools and to the ESRI survey. The Green Paper then went on to set out the recommendations of the NCCA regarding the proposed senior cycle structure:

- Students would take courses from within two national programmes - the Leaving Certificate and the Senior Certificate.
- The Leaving Certificate and the Senior Certificate would be two-year programmes but the Senior Certificate would be constructed in two modules of one year each with certificatation available at the end of each year.

- Students would be allowed to choose courses from the Leaving Certificate and the Senior Certificate in any one year.

- There should be a certificate of senior cycle education which would record the achievements of students under the Leaving Certificate and/or Senior Certificate.[22]

Also addressed in the Green Paper was the need for an improved vocational and technical orientation to education at second level with strengthened links to the business world, as recommended by the *Report of the Industrial Policy Review Group*. In this regard, the paper eschewed the possibility of providing such an orientation through a separate non-academic vocational stream on the basis that since this would be regarded as providing only for less able children it would not meet the objectives of ensuring a broadly based education for all with vocational options and orientation up to the completion of the second level stage. It proposed to build on and expand the range of vocational options within the existing Leaving Certificate programme. In summary then, what was proposed in the Green Paper was a single "umbrella certificate", Certificate of Senior Cycle Education, which would certify the achievements of pupils whether within the Leaving Certificate Programme or the Senior Certificate Programme or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. A "pick and mix" approach would be permitted and students could study elements from either the Leaving Certificate or the Senior Certificate Programme.

This appeared to be the favoured approach during the discussions on the Green Paper which took place between 1992 and 1994. In the NCCA policy document - *Towards the New Century* - issued in March, 1993[23], NCCA policy was stated to be founded on four essential policy premises:

i. The senior cycle curriculum should be viewed as a single entity and designed to cater for up to 90% of the age range 15-18 years.

ii. Priority must be given to the provision of quality experience in a variety of forms to all including both high achieving students and those students for whom the current Leaving Certificate Programme is unsuited.

iii. One major programme should be provided at senior cycle for national certification, the Leaving Certificate Programme. The Transition Programme should also be recognised for funding for planning purposes as an integral part of the three-year senior cycle but not for national certification.

iv. Appropriate forms of student assessment must be developed to complement the curricular approaches set out in senior cycle programmes.

In adopting this approach the NCCA recognised that it was adjusting its earlier (1991) position but argued that the adjustment was one of designation, not of substance.

Two circulars issued by the Minister for Education in 1993 (M31/93 and M47/93) indicated that the Minister had taken a decision to restructure the senior cycle along the lines recommended by the NCCA. This decision has been described as "a major and decisive step in the relatively short history of curriculum development in Ireland" (Gleeson and Granville, 1996).[24] Circular M31/93 and subsequent information booklets and video issued by the Department of Education clarified the direction for senior cycle in the future.[25] According to this circular the Leaving Certificate programme would in future incorporate three components: higher, ordinary and applied. The new Leaving Certificate Applied Programme would comprise a distinct self contained programme replacing and expanding on the existing Senior Certificate and Vocational Preparation and Training (VPT1) Programmes. It was envisaged that as well as that proportion of students who were at that time taking such options as Senior Certificate and VPT1 courses, many of the 23% or so who were taking ordinary level Leaving Certificate but only achieving minimally if at all would also take this course. The documentation highlighted that schools would be expected to offer and students to take the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme as an entire programme with its own ethos and integrity.

Since then there has been a good deal of discussion as to whether the decision to offer the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme as a distinct and discrete programme is the correct one. The *Report on the National Education Convention* expressed concern that since the course will not lead to formal vocational qualifications and that the courses certificands may only progress to limited courses of post-secondary education, there is a distinct danger that it will be seen as a "soft option" track and of limited value by students unless it is carefully planned and designed to respond to student needs.[26] An article by Doyle and Tuohy in *Studies*,[27] identified a number of important concerns in relation to the programme. These were summarised as follows:

- A poor tradition of research
- An underlying albeit understandable anxiety to obtain social funding
- Parental and student scepticism
- The likelihood that it will further rather than reduce inequity through the promotion of social ghettos.

These concerns have been refuted by Gleeson and Granville[28]. In that paper they strongly defend the significance of a stand-alone and discrete programme such as the Leaving Certificate Applied. They argue that the Leaving Certificate Applied can deliver if it is given the necessary social support structure. They suggest that the programme provides a real opportunity to respond to the basic challenge set down by the OECD examiners in 1991:

> "The transformation of classrooms from ..... traditional centres of instruction to act as centres of learning whose initiative, independence of thought, practical skills, problem solving and cognitive strategies become central rather than marginal as they often are at present."[29]

An analysis of the Leaving Certificate Applied would suggest that if it is to be successfully implemented, it requires to be offered as a discrete and separate programme rather than as a programme from which pupils can pick and mix. The thematic approach on which it is based is a fundamentally different approach to the subject-based approach of the traditional Leaving

Certificate. The proposed modes and techniques of assessment (although not yet finally agreed) are so fundamentally different to the "pen and paper" approach of the Leaving Certificate as to raise considerable difficulties if both approaches were being attempted simultaneously by the same pupils.

However, the difficulties facing schools and teachers, not to mention pupils, in addressing the new Leaving Certificate Applied may have been underestimated. Traditional training programmes for post-primary teachers - the Higher Diploma in Education course - has always had a strong content bias and was and is subject based. The fundamentally different approach required by the Leaving Certificate Applied imposes quite different demands and requirements on the teachers teaching the programme to those which they have traditionally faced in teaching more academic programmes in second level schools. The importance of incareer development has been recognised by the Department of Education in its various circulars and the Curriculum Development Unit of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee and the Curriculum Development Centre in Shannon have been contracted to provide detailed inservice for schools offering the programme. The question of how new teachers entering the profession will be prepared for the diversity of courses and the variety of teaching and learning styles implicit within these courses has yet to be addressed.

This paper has only touched on a small section of the issues which face us in relation to the redefinition of senior cycle second level education in Ireland. It has not adverted to the implications of Transition Year and its longer term implications for senior cycle education. Nor has it addressed the questions relating to the expansion of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme particularly the implications of the link modules for both pupils and teachers. In the first paragraph of this paper, we referred to the 25,000 young people following

technical/vocational programmes at senior cycle. Almost two-thirds of these are attending Post-Leaving Certificate courses which probably should not be classified at all under second level. The recognition given in the White Paper to Further Education by allocating a separate chapter to this question gives rise to some hope that the separate treatment of further education will be addressed in the near future. However, that is an issue for another time and another paper.

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